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Learning from the best

Faculty mentoring makes for superior teaching



Professor Philip Halpern

In the classroom as in so many other arenas, nothing succeeds like success.

To ensure the continuation of the high-quality teaching that has guided generations of UB Law students, new tenure-track faculty are mentored in effective teaching skills. Each new faculty member is assigned a three-person “visiting committee” of senior faculty that guides them along the path to achieving tenure.

The committee concerns itself largely with research, scholarship and publication, but nurturing classroom skills through class visits and detailed feedback is an important part of its work. “The goal is to get them through the promotion and tenure process, bringing them up to speed as effective professors,” says **James A. Gardner**, vice dean for academic affairs. “Committee members will observe their classes every semester and write a report, and they will sit down with the person they’ve observed and talk things over. Sometimes they review their PowerPoints and make suggestions, and talk about how to use technology in the classroom and when not to – really about how to present material most effectively.”

For **Associate Professor Irus Braverman**, the process began when her visit-

ing committee helped her decide what courses to teach, finally settling on criminal procedure. “That was the first hurdle,” Braverman says. “I needed to choose what my central teaching commitment would be.

“I’ve worked very closely with them,” Braverman says of her visiting committee, which consists of **Professors Errol Meidinger**, chair, **Guyora Binder** and **Athena Mutua**. “We’ve had a lot of debates about how to teach things – what methodology to use, when to use PowerPoint, when to lecture. I was most comfortable with sophist methods, asking a lot of questions, and some students were not so comfortable with that. I learned to soften things.”

Classroom management is part of the discussion, and after much consideration, Braverman decided to ban the use of laptops, with all their potential for distraction, in her classes. “That has been very successful,” she says. “Students love it. They come to me after class and say, ‘I won’t say it out loud, but I love it.’

“At first I wasn’t completely tuned in to American law students,” says Braverman, whose law studies were completed in Israel. “Now I get very good feedback. It’s a well-earned reward for a lot of work and thinking every day about how to approach things that might otherwise be very dry and technical. Students tell me they’ve never had three hours go by so quickly.”

Associate Professor Mark Bartholomew says the pedagogical feedback he has received from his visiting committee – **Professors Jim Wooten**, chair, **Robert Reis** and **Rebecca French** – has spun off the further benefit of professional relationships. Bartholomew has co-taught courses with two of those committee members: a colloquium on intellectual property law that he taught with Reis, and a seminar called Fashion and the Law, with French.

Just as profitable, he says, is the con-

tinual traffic in ideas, especially with Wooten. “He sends me things in the news, scholarly articles about things that are useful to my class,” Bartholomew says. In addition, the two colleagues served together on a panel to impart teaching tips to adjunct faculty members at the Law School.

“It’s been a really good process,” **Associate Professor Rick Su** says of his work with his visiting committee, which consists of **Professors James Gardner**, chair, **Teri Miller** and **Philip Halpern**. “Just having an outside observer is helpful. You prepare for class, you get a sense for who you are in front of a class, but having another person visit and observe has been incredibly helpful in that regard.”

Gardner’s feedback, for one, is almost a play-by-play, Su says. “He has a very good sense of how the students are reacting. Sitting in the back of the room, he’s good at documenting almost in a statistical way how many people are coming in on time, when the last person arrives, when they take notes, when they’re looking at the Internet. He’ll say things like, ‘In this section they were all paying attention, but after this discussion people started dropping off.’”

In response to feedback from his committee members, Su says, he has made changes in his approach, for example reconsidering the order in which he presents cases, and whether to set up the case with background first, or jump right into the discussion and bring in the fact pattern later.

Su also notes that there’s no one right way to be effective in the classroom. “You have to work with your subject and your own personality,” he says. “Although everyone has their way and they’re happy to share, they recognize that you have to develop a method that works for you.”

“It’s been a really good process.”

— Associate Professor Rick Su on his work with his visiting committee

